

New breeding records of the Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala* in Côte d'Ivoire

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Des observations sur la parade et la nidification du Martin-chasseur à tête grise *Halcyon leucocephala*, faites de février à mai dans le Parc National de la Comoé, Côte d'Ivoire, sont rapportées. Contrairement à ce qui a été publié à ce sujet, l'espèce semblerait nicher régulièrement dans le pays; ceci pourrait résulter d'une extension de son aire de reproduction.

Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala* is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa where it inhabits all types of woodland, wooded and bushed grassland, riverine thickets, cultivation and forest edge. It is absent from southern parts of the continent and does not penetrate forest zones in western and central Africa. The species is sedentary at equatorial latitudes but an intra-African migrant at higher ones⁸. Recoveries of adults ringed in Ethiopia have been made in Uganda (960 km) and Kenya (1,750 km)¹. One ringed in Malawi was recovered in Zaïre (1,430 km)¹¹. In West Africa the species is recorded from every country and is an intra-African migrant with breeding records in Sénégal, Gambia (listed as resident), Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Togo and Nigeria. In Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Bénin it is considered a migrant without definite breeding records⁶. Its migration was studied in detail in Nigeria by Skinner¹² who found it to be a dry season breeding visitor to the south of the country and a wet season visitor to the north. In the southern Guinea savannah breeding commences in late January, and in the northern Guinea savannah breeding occurs in mid-March–mid-June. Both populations move north once the young fledge⁷ which may imply a three-stage migration with pre-breeding migration northward, a post-breeding migration farther north and post-moult-

ing migration southward^{8,12}. A similar migration pattern is known for *H. l. pallidiventris* in southern Africa³.

In Côte d'Ivoire, Thiollay¹³ listed Grey-headed Kingfisher as an African migrant widespread in the Guinea savannah in the dry season but only occurring north of 09°N in June–October. This was repeated by Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire⁵ despite the fact that Demey & Fishpool⁴ described a breeding population near Grand Bassam on the coast. In Comoé National Park the species was considered a non-breeding migrant occurring during November to May². Here, we describe new breeding records in the country.

New breeding records

In October 1994–April 1997, VS regularly stayed in Comoé National Park, north-east Côte d'Ivoire. The habitat is principally northern Guinea savannah with gallery forest along larger rivers and isolated forests of varying size within the savannah. Grey-headed



Figure 1. Nesting hole of Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala* in the bank of the Comoé River, Comoé National Park, 2 April 1999 (Volker Salewski)



Figure 2. Juvenile Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala*, Kongo River, Comoé National Park (Volker Salewski)

Kingfisher was observed almost daily from November and was still present in the area when VS departed in late April. It was suspected that the species might be breeding as courtship behaviour, as described by Fry *et al.*⁸, was observed on several occasions but no nests were found.

In 1998–99, we visited Gué Auto, in the north of Comoé National Park, regularly at two-week intervals from early October to mid-December and in early February–late April. Grey-headed Kingfisher was noted from early December. During 1999 several birds were seen daily by the Comoé River. They were very active and called frequently. Courtship behaviour and intraspecific aggression were observed several times in February–March. On 2 April, a bird appeared to fly out of a hole in the river bank and on the following day, when the hole (Fig 1) was observed for a longer period, a bird was seen to enter it. It remained inside for c3 mins. During this time it excavated sand and was evidently working on the hole. On 20 April, two additional active holes in the river bank were found with adults seen to leave them, while on 21 April, two juveniles that had probably fledged recently were observed on the gallery forest edge. These locations were all within c300 m of each other.

Southern parts of the park were visited just for a few days. On 16 April an adult was observed near the mouth of the river Kongo carrying a large insect, indicating that it was feeding young and a juvenile was mist-netted there (Fig 2). On 17 April, one flew out of hole in the bank of the nearby river Comoé. A few kilometres to the south, near the mouth of the river Lola, an active hole was found. It was within a larger hole, probably dug by an Aardvark *Oryteropus afer*, as has been described by Clancey & Herremans⁵. Additionally, on 4 May, three Grey-headed Kingfishers showing courtship behaviour were observed near Bouaké.

Discussion

These observations demonstrate that breeding of the Grey-headed Kingfisher in Côte d'Ivoire is not rare or restricted to the coastal population described by Demey & Fishpool⁴. The discovery of several nests and evidence of other breeding pairs at various latitudes (our observations spanned 07°42'N–09°16'N) demonstrate that the species is a breeding migrant, occasionally at high density, in Comoé National Park. Other active holes, where we did not observe the species, may have been occupied by either Blue-breasted *H. malimbica* or Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis*, which are also common in the park. In Nigeria, a density of only one pair per 0.5–1 km of river bank was found⁸.

Grey-headed Kingfisher is a conspicuous and

attractive species. In Comoé National Park observations by several ornithologists during 1965 to 1980 led to the first species list for the area being produced⁷. For this reason, it appears unlikely that nesting at high density would have been overlooked and these breeding records may therefore indicate a genuine range extension. Elsewhere in West Africa, the species is a scarce breeder in countries at comparable latitudes, eg Liberia⁸ and has not been recorded to breed in countries to the north of Côte d'Ivoire such as Burkina Faso and Niger. In Ghana it is known (many pairs) at Kpandu¹¹ (07°00'N) which is further south than Comoé National Park but the location lies on the edge of the Dahomey Gap where there is a different climatic regime. ↗

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